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ABSTRACT

Because the Texas Department of Human Resources (DHR) was demanding writing competency from its employees, and the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) had a supply of competent writers in the form of undergraduate and graduate English majors, UTSA established a writing laboratory at the DHR. A three-credit course was developed to briefly train the intern students in writing for nonacademic audiences and to examine the concerns of writing instructors in the areas of writing process, aim and audience, voice, diction, and use of simple English. The initial writing lab, to which DHR employees could bring a piece of writing and receive individual tutoring, was not used by the employees, so the lab was adapted to the needs of a bureaucracy. A telephone "grammar hotline" brought many questions, and orientation sessions with successive small groups of employees helped to acquaint the UTSA students with the employees' specific writing needs. Effective letter writing, medical terminology, and simple English instead of bureaucratic jargon were some areas studied in the meetings. Three positive results came out of the program: improved writing by the DHR employees, their new awareness of language and ways to use it more effectively, and administrative approval for an expanded laboratory. (HTH)

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Taking the Writing Lab -- and English Majors -- Outside the University

By

Marjorie Smelstor and Marion Tangum

Working with one bureaucracy--with its inherent rigidity and resistance to change and experimentation--is trouble enough, but dealing with two bureaucracies, simultaneously, is potentially dangerous. Unless, that is, both organizations benefit from the connection. We recently developed a kind of "Bureaucratic Connection," involving The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and the Texas Department of Human Resources (DHR). Using English majors from the university to staff a Writing Laboratory at the DHR, we discovered a new meaning for the supply-demand formula. The DHR was demanding writing competency of their employees; the university had a supply of competent writers--English majors. The connection was waiting to be made. Though no money passed hands, economics, in this sense of supply and demand, motivated a connection, now in its second semester, which has proved mutually beneficial to both groups of people.

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RATIONALE

Some administrators of the Texas Department of Human Resources, a large state agency with more than 1000 employees, were concerned about the inadequate, at times illiterate, reports, correspondence, memoranda, and other writing turned out by the employees. The administrators wanted the employees to improve their writing, but the situation wasn't that simple. How to supply the training and continuous help the employees needed to become competent writers? Where to find the people who could teach the DHR employees to write?

Eighteen miles away the supply was housed: undergraduate and graduate English majors at The University of Texas at San Antonio. Not only did the majors purport to be literate, they were also anxious to be marketable when they received their B.A. and M.A. degrees. Acting as interns at the DHR would be a wonderful opportunity to apply what they had learned at the university and to gain practical experience in the non-academic world, the world that would probably employ a number of them, especially those who were looking for positions outside the traditional one of teaching.[1]

The supply-demand formula thus motivated us to establish a Writing Laboratory at the Texas Department of Human Resources. Students would get on-the-job experience and the employees of the DHR would receive writing instruction in a variety of formats: tutorial sessions, small classes, and conversations on the hotline (Dial-a-Grammar).

TRAINING OF INTERNS

As we thought about the writing internship and talked with many students, we quickly realized that most were extremely capable students of literature and academic writing, but neither trained nor experienced

in the process and product of writing done in a non-academic setting for non-academic audiences. The bulk of their prose--literary analysis written for academicians--was limited in both its aim and audience. To simply turn these students loose at the DHR, with that bureaucracy's different writing aims and audiences, might have been adventuresome, but not particularly sensible. Instead we developed a three-credit course which consisted of approximately eight classes--several before the students went to the DHR, the rest while they worked as interns--and bi-weekly conferences with the instructor. This training was invaluable, for it provided the students with both theoretical background in rhetoric and writing experiences they needed to become competent and confident writers themselves, a prerequisite for effective writing instructors.

We began the classes by discussing the idea of a Writing Laboratory. Though UTSA has a Writing Lab, most of the interns, chosen because they were especially good students, had never used its services and therefore had little sense of the philosophy that informs writing instruction done in a laboratory situation. Accustomed to teaching and learning that occurs in the traditional classroom situation, they needed to consider the importance of individualization in teaching writing and ways in which this could happen efficiently and effectively. Tutoring, a basic component of the Lab, and grouping people with similar concerns into small classes or workshops were two dimensions of individualized instruction which we discussed at length. We also considered some of the qualities of successful Lab instructors--openness, friendliness, firmness, sincerity, flexibility, competence--and some of their responsibilities, including record-keeping.[2] Our initial classes at the university, then, focused

on general questions: Why a Lab? How does it work? What kinds of instructors best serve the visitors to a Lab?

We then examined some of the theoretical concerns writers and writing teachers must face, particularly the two following areas:

--WRITING PROCESS

As we talked about the writing patterns of the DHR employees we were teaching, we wondered if the pre-writing, writing, and re-writing triad were irrelevant. After all, the employees were frequently asked to compose letters or memoranda at the typewriter, mail them immediately, and then proceed to the next of many tasks that had to be completed by 5 p.m. Despite this emphasis upon completing the product, the interns learned to help their student writers see the importance of allowing some time--even if it were only a short period--for reflection before composing and for revising and editing at the end of the process. Most important, however, was the attitudinal change the interns tried to encourage, the recognition that writing of all sorts involves more than simply stringing together words and sentences in the hope that the product will pass a supervisor's cursory inspection. The employees began to see that their responsibility as writers was to plan, write,

and revise--steps in the writing process that would help them communicate with their intended audience.

--AIM AND AUDIENCE Surprisingly, the English majors had not thought much about how aim and audience shape writing. Trained to write primarily for one purpose and audience--academic--they needed both instruction and practice in understanding the implications of writing for different reasons and to different persons. Applying this theory to the major kinds of prose done at the DHR--job applications and résumés, letters, memoranda--the students tried their hand at each. Because they were amazed at how different these kinds of writing were from their typical efforts at literary analysis, they approached their work at the DHR Lab with an important understanding of the complexities the employees faced when they sat before their blank pages.

Other issues covered in class discussion and conferences included more specific areas of writing:

--VOICE Fond of hiding themselves behind structures like "one can see" and "it has been decided," the students needed a great deal of unlearning to see the importance of having a voice. In

their journals they began to take note of the preponderance of voice-less prose--uttered by politicians, written by academicians, perpetuated by bureaucrats of all types--and they became more eager to insert themselves in their own writing and to help the DHR employees do the same.

--DICTION

Once again, unlearning was necessary as, for example, we discussed the appropriateness of contractions--words students had been taught never to write--and the superfluity of adverbs like "very," "quite," and "rather"--words they had thought were essential to good prose.[3]

--PLAIN ENGLISH

Pointing out the preponderance of gobbledygook in academic writing, the kind the students were reading and writing, was a convenient way to focus on the same problem in other kinds of bureaucratic prose. William Zinsser's admonition haunted the students as they did their own writing and as they helped the DHR employees improve theirs: ". . .just because people work for an institution they don't have to write like one."[4]

HOW THE LAB WORKS

From the beginning we designed our instruction heuristically, adapting it to the needs of DHR employees as those needs surfaced.

This adaptability--linking our aims in teaching language to our audience's needs in using it--is the reason for our positive results.[5]

We set up the Writing Lab initially as a place where employees could bring a piece of writing and receive individual tutoring--the technique of "show-and-practice" that teaches so effectively when the Lab's setting is within the university.[6] But in our setting outside the university, that approach brought little success: most employees, instead of seeking our help, steadfastly stayed at their desks. It wasn't because they didn't need help or didn't care about writing well; rather, their reluctance stemmed from the nature of their bureaucracy. Rigidity--not innovative change--is a bureaucracy's central characteristic.[7] Employees plodded through set, formal tasks in set, formal patterns: they approached all their writing--job application forms, performance evaluation forms, case workers' reporting forms, and form letters--in the same mechanical way, methodically filling in blanks without regarding the unique person and purpose they wrote for. Conditioned by their routine, they weren't likely to come to the Lab.

They were afraid to come, too: they might be labeled as people who couldn't write. So they sheltered their image and sat at their desks, quietly churning out meaningless words instead of seeking advice.

To reach the people we wanted to help, then, we had to change the thrust of the Lab. First, we emphasized our phone-in service instead of our drop-in one. By using our "grammar hot-line," employees could get answers to questions about writing without disrupting their routines or making their problems visible. We noticed immediate results: employees throughout the division--84 by the end of the semester--called in the midst of composing to ask which commas were really needed in a six-comma

clause, whether "criteria" worked better with "is" or "are," and whether an unresponsive client would "loose" or "lose" his Medicaid benefits.

Next, we set up orientation sessions for all employees, meeting with them in successive small groups to acquaint them with our talents and, more significantly, to discover their unique writing needs. Then we designed a number of 30-minute classes based on those needs. A class on accomplishing aim for audience centered on the problems and people that our employees faced daily. An introduction to the writing process related pre-writing to their actual jobs, too, preparing them to write by first considering the conditions of the clients they'd be writing. And instruction in rewriting fit a real need, too, since it revolved around the revision of their own letters to their own clients. Thus, we could offer the DHR workers more substance than we could on the hot-line, and still invade neither their patterns nor their privacy.

To entice our audience, we published newsletters full of assurances that these classes would explore language from the employees' standpoint--not from some esoteric point of view. So in promoting a class called "Let Your Letters Do Your Work," we promised to attack their frequent source of frustration: "Tired of follow-ups? Learn how to write effective letters that get the response you want the first time around." An ad for a class on diction guaranteed a way to "cut out bureaucratic jargon," the stuff they struggled to read and write every day. And our ad pushing "Medical Terminology" claimed to make them able to "understand, explain, spell, and use" that special vocabulary expertly--exactly what medical workers were expected to do all the time.

We delivered on these promises, too, making sure that classes' contents came from the bureaucracy itself. In letter writing, we used

models from the employees' on-the-job experiences, teaching such specific skills as ways to convince an indigent woman to obtain free medical checkups for her children. In teaching diction, we took all the "bureaucratese" that we sought to abolish from the abundant supply in actual DHR memos, letters, and reports. And the terms we probed in "Medical Terminology" came from the workers' own efforts to help ignorant people make sense out of frightening language.

As employees realized how tailor-made this instruction was, they began to identify their needs more explicitly and the curriculum became more specified: "Words Often Confused," "How to Use the Right Pronoun in the Right Place," "Making Sure that Sentence Parts Agree," and "Writing Effective Performance Evaluations" were some of the 41 classes we held for more than 200 DHR members.

EVALUATING THE LAB

We've noticed three kinds of results from our first semester's effort. The immediate one was improved writing in lots of individual instances: more letters went out with well-placed commas, with plural verbs matching plural subjects, and without an unnecessary "this is to inform you" than would have occurred without us.

More important, though, is a new awareness of language that DHR employees are beginning to sense. A supervisor discovered that reading simple English is fun, so he began to write more simply himself. Social workers, who swore that writing to clients was a waste of time since they never got a response, changed their minds when they saw letters as more than mechanical forms--as a way, instead, for two human beings to understand each other. And secretaries who had carried a grudge against commas for years began to warm up to them when they

saw punctuation working to make meaning clear.

But the result that most clearly points to this new interest is the expanded Lab program that's been approved by the DHR for this fall. The Lab is now open to all employees--not just to a single division--so that hundreds more people can receive writing instruction. And we've achieved important changes that give this year's Lab the potential to develop skilled writers. Classes can now accommodate feedback: six two-hour classes, offered in six consecutive weeks, comprise the curriculum; and although each class deals with a slightly different writing task, necessary skills overlap. So the principles of good writing that underlie "Making Your Sentences Do What You Want" will also apply to "Writing Effective Letters" and "Memos and Reports" in subsequent weeks. And writing problems that surface in early classes like "Job Applications and Résumés" can be further probed--and solved--in classes coming later in the course. The final session's "ways to make your message more meaningful" can evolve from previous classes' writing samples, making this last class on "Using Plain English" a reinforcement of the course as a whole.

So that its aim can be molded to its audience, the course is now designed for homogeneous groups: social workers come to classes on Tuesdays; clerical workers on Wednesdays; and supervisors, Thursdays. And everyone who completes the course receives a congratulatory certificate, offering a visible reward for learning that encourages employees to view the Lab positively--not as a refuge for poor writers but as a place that produces writing skill.

Positive results of our pilot project, then, are numerous. And they extend beyond the DHR, including ways that the UTSA interns have grown

as writers and as teachers of writing as well. The confidence now marking their comments on writing reflects their new competence:

> --"I've learned the importance of revision. I no longer scribble phrases down and expect them to 'pass.' I have also learned to put 'me' into my writing."
>
> --"I've become more conscious of the 'nuts and bolts' of writing. Organizing my thoughts seems easier."
>
> --"I've learned a great deal about my writing; the most important thing, though, is that writing is a process that requires pre-writing and revision."
>
> --"I've come to consider language more closely from the standpoint of its effects. That is, I can stand back a little more from my own writing and see it more objectively as a result of this experience."

And that confidence carries over to their teaching too:

> --"You cannot teach anyone to write exactly like someone else. People are individuals; their writing should be as individual as they are."
>
> --"I've learned that most people cannot quickly understand material they are not familiar with--they need examples and illustrations."
>
> --"I've learned to narrow down the most complicated mess of words by asking the question, "What are you trying to say?'"
>
> --"I've seen the importance of teaching human beings instead of subjects, and I've noted the necessity of shaping instruction to meet the needs of those human beings."

Adaptability--the "willingness to change" that Joyce Steward identifies as central to teaching and learning in a writing lab--enabled us to reach our audience and, thus, to teach.[8] At the same time, it was the essence of what we learned.

NOTES

[1]William D. Schaefer and John Algeo, in articles appearing in Profession 78, offer useful suggestions for revising curricula to better educate students for non-academic jobs. (William D. Schaefer, "Still Crazy after All These Years," pp. 1-7; John Algeo, "After the Fall: Some Observations on Graduate Curricula," pp. 16-21).

[2]Joyce S. Steward, "To Like to Have Written: Learning the Laboratory Way," ADE Bulletin, January 1975, pp. 37-38.

[3]John R. Trimble, Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), pp. 59-68.

[4]William Zinsser, On Writing Well (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 125.

[5]James Kinneavy makes it clear that accommodating aim to audience is basic to all aspects of using, and learning to use, language. (James Kinneavy, John Q. Cope, and J. W. Campbell, Aims and Audiences in Writing [Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., 1976], p. 4).

[6]Steward, p. 35.

[7]Michel Crozier, The Bureaucratic Phenomenon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 195.

[8]Steward, p. 38.